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LivingArts

Branding, on the brain

Cate McQuaid
Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent. Boston Globe

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Art Review

Branded and On Display

At: **Tufts University Art Gallery**, Aidekman Arts Center, 40R Talbot Ave., Medford, through March 30. 617-627-3518. ase.tufts.edu/gallery

MEDFORD - Apple. Coke. Kleenex. Branding and advertising pervade American culture. Consequently, most people over the age of 12 watch commercials with some skepticism. Yet most of us still fall for what certain brands signify. I use a Mac, and when a friend suggested that I buy a laptop PC because it would probably be cheaper and fit my needs just as well, I cringed. There's no escaping the power of branding. It's everywhere, preying on us.

"Branded and On Display" at the **Tufts University Art Gallery** gathers several artists who look critically at the hard sell. The show, organized by the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and curated by Judith Hoos Fox and Ginger Gregg Duggan, begins to strip away - in provocative and sometimes annoying ways - the hallucination advertising constantly builds up.

Artists are in a unique position to critique advertising, because they use the same tools and techniques as the creative directors of ad agencies. Heck, they're probably old school chums. They're only different in that advertisers purvey dreams; artists seek to wake us up.

Hank Willis Thomas's black-and-white photo "Branded Head" comes as a jolt. Thomas deploys a style borrowed from advertising; this image looks as if it belongs on a billboard. It shows the head of a black man, with his face cropped out and the Nike swoosh Photoshopped onto his scalp.

As Fox suggests in her catalog essay, the man's color brands him, especially when we can't see his face. The branding on his skin chillingly cites slavery. Nike's catchphrase "just do it" imbues the Nike-brand wearer with his own agency, but Thomas hints that none of us is really a free agent; the corporations own us.

Many artists in "Branded and On Display" use familiar graphic language, from corporate logos to bar codes. Louis Cameron scanned the bar codes on every item in his apartment, then blended the images into an animated video projection. It's surprisingly gorgeous and hypnotic, with black bars shifting to white and back, giving the sense of doors opening and closing, or curtains ruffling in a breeze. There's triumph in its harmonious minimalism; Cameron has appropriated the ugliest stuff of commerce and made it beautiful.

Coca-Cola appears twice, as artists put its red-and-white stamp on old and new. Ai Weiwei's "Neolithic Culture Pot With Coca-Cola Logo" has the fluid script scrawled gaudily over a 7,000- to 10,000- year-old pot, a sharp and shocking desecration of a relic that pointedly suggests there are no limits to corporate greed. Siebren Versteeg's "Dynamic Ribbon Device" sets a news feed in Coke's familiar cursive scrolling across a plasma screen in the familiar red and white, with water droplets cascading down the surface as they do on a cool, mouthwatering can of soda.

In his video codirected with Bill McMullen, "North Star," Ryan McGinness calls upon a graphic style everyone will recognize from restroom doors and road signs. We associate the style with direction: It says, here's

where you should go. Hence the video's title. But McGinness subverts the suggested clarity; he puts those symbols, and more elaborate ones (such as a man with binoculars) in the same visual grain, in a narrative loop that has no beginning or end. It's enchanting, and seemingly directive, but ultimately it makes no sense - which is McGinness's point. Life is not as simple as a road sign or a logo.

Other artists explore the strategies of display, something art exhibition designers and store managers work with every day. Clay Ketter's "Square Nine (Surface Composite #13)" looks out of place in a gallery - it's just a shelving unit, with a half-dozen different arrays of shelves. In revealing the background of a display, he points out how it is at once invisible and crucial to showing off the product. He links the quotidian display case to sculptural Minimalists such as Donald Judd.

"Branded and On Display" trips up where it becomes pedantic. We like to think of ourselves as "educated consumers" (that could be a brand in itself). We don't want to be told what we already know.

Michael Blum's video and documentation of a performance, "My Sneakers," in which he traces the pair of Nikes he bought in Paris to the place of their manufacture in Indonesia, gets preachy about globalization.

Yuken Teruya's "Notice Forest" enchants with its technical brilliance - she has cut delicate trees out of the sides of shopping bags and folded them inward to make dynamic dioramas. But her political point - that we're wasting trees not only on expensive bags but on the paper money that we spend - feels forced.

Laurie Hogin's garish paintings, "Allegory of Psychodemographics: Twenty-Four Brands My Family Uses in a Typical Summer Day," which feature hybrid monkeys with fur the color and pattern of various logos, including the American flag, discouragingly reduces her family to pure consumers, nothing more.

That's not inaccurate. It's just depressing. The artists in "Branded and On Display" often make their points as advertisers do, in clever, eye-catching ways. It's a hair-of-the-dog antidote to a consumer's bender - a little eye-opening, but not near enough to get us to give up the stuff.

Caption: Above: Ai Weiwei's "Neolithic Culture Pot With Coca-Cola Logo"; right: Hank Willis Thomas's "Branded Head." ai wewei (top); courtesy of Jacqueline bradley and clarence otis jr. (right)

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